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Private Aid to Latin Rebels at Issue

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 12 — There is mounting concern at the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency about the involvement of private American citizens in Nicaraguan rebel operations, Reagan Administration officials said today.

The officials said an Alabama-based group of military veterans had recently stepped up its efforts to aid the rebels and that it currently has a team of 6 to 10 men inside Nicaragua.

Two members of the group, Civilian Military Assistance, were killed in September when their helicopter was shot down during a rebel air raid.

Although President Reagan has expressed sympathy for private efforts to aid the rebels, the officials said there was concern that the veterans might provoke a crisis between Washington and Managua by carrying out their own raids in Nicaragua.

"The C.I.A. doesn't control these guys and can't really keep track of them, so they're a wild card that could cause everyone serious problems," one senior national security official said.

Reports of Combat Plans

The leader of Civilian Military Assistance, Thomas V. Posey of Decatur, Ala., said in a telephone interview today that the Americans would not

participate in combat operations but were training and assisting rebel forces at base camps in Nicaragua.

Other members of the group, however, have outlined plans for combat operations, according to a series of articles published recently by The Memphis Commercial Appeal.

The newspaper reported last week that a band of private American citizens, including several combat veterans from Tennessee, traveled to Honduras recently to prepare for military operations in Nicaragua sometime early next year.

The paper quoted the leader of the team as saying that he expected 30 American volunteers to join about 70 rebels in attacks on strategic military targets in Nicaragua.

The C.I.A., according to Administration officials, is particularly concerned that the private Americans could become involved in an incident that would increase already-tense relations between Washington and Managua and undermine any hope of obtaining Congressional approval for a resumption of United States aid to the insurgents.

A Senate Democrat, Jim Sasser of Tennessee, voiced concern about the veterans today. "It's a very dangerous precedent to have private citizens conducting combat operations against a government that the United States has diplomatic relations with," he said.

"These men are obviously very patriotic and brave, but I think their efforts are misguided."

"There's also a danger of being taken prisoner," Mr. Sasser added. "Then what is policy of the United States? It could put us in a difficult spot and even pull us into some sort of shooting war with Nicaragua."

In October, Mr. Reagan said private efforts to aid the rebels were "quite in line with what has been a pretty well established tradition in our country." He said he would "be inclined to not want to interfere with them."

Earlier this week, the Justice Department, responding to an article in the Washington Post about private donations to the rebels, said that efforts by United States citizens to raise humanitarian aid for the insurgents did not violate Federal laws.

Group Has New Chapters

Mr. Posey said that since September, Civilian Military Assistance has added chapters in Fort Worth, Miami, Nashville, Chicago, St. Louis, and Tallahassee, Fla. "We've had people from all over the country," he said, "who want to join and fight the Communists."

Mr. Posey said that the group has sent "tons" of medical and nonlethal military equipment to the rebels in recent months. With continued assistance, he said, the rebels "could be in Managua by the end of next year."

Mr. Posey said the private Americans "do not go to Nicaragua to be fighters" and are discouraged from participating in combat. But the men reserve the right "to fight to defend themselves if they are attacked," he added.

In another development concerning the Nicaraguan rebels, a senior member of the House Appropriations Committee, Representative Joseph P. Addabbo of Queens, has asked the State Department for assurance that no United States foreign aid has been diverted to the insurgents.

In a Dec. 11 letter to Secretary of State George P. Shultz that the Democratic Congressman's office made public today, Mr. Addabbo said: "I am concerned that countries receiving U.S. foreign assistance aid may be utilizing a portion of such aid to assist the Contras and, in so doing, effect a rather devious contravention of the law."